The Imagined User of "Universal" Information Access Efforts: Ingrained Assumptions in Early American Public Libraries and Large-Scale Digitization Initiatives

Elisabeth A. Jones
The Information School
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195
eaj6@uw.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, two ambitious book-scanning initiatives – Google Book Search and the Open Content Alliance – were launched, both claiming the eventual goal of digitizing every book in the world, for the use of every person in the world. The initiatives have followed different paths: one private, one public; one centralized, one dispersed; one scanning everything right away, one starting with the public domain. Both, however, have been lauded for their groundbreaking potential to increase access to information worldwide.

Still, the basic impetus that underlies these initiatives is far from novel. In fact, the central motivation of such large-scale digitization initiatives (LSDIs) – to provide wide-ranging information access to as many people as possible – has strong historical precedents, especially in the early history of the American public library. Specifically, like LSDIs, early free public libraries reflected a top-down, supply-side approach to information access, and incorporated a high degree of private patronage at their initiation. The history of the American public library can thus illuminate many of the positive outcomes that can result from large-scale information initiatives; however, it also reveals some of the perils they might encounter.

In this poster, I will begin to explore one facet of the comparison between LSDIs and early free public libraries: that is, the sense in which each is constructed around a particular vision of "the imagined user," and how the inscription of that imaginary in each case has impacted – or might in the future impact – the claims to universality maintained by each.

2. IMAGINED USERS

2.1 The Early American Public Library

Tax-supported American public libraries were intended as broadly public institutions from their very beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century [1-4]. Still, the individual motivations that guided their structural and political design were not nearly so broad. In fact, the public library movement *per se* was largely built upon the assumptions and motives of a small set of wealthy, powerful, and often paternalistic white Anglo-Saxon protestant men. These early public library leaders shared many common assumptions; among them, two dueling visions of library users, as either (a) genteel, self-improving, perfectible and aspiring members of the middle class, or (b) more frightening specters, defined by their economic, ethnic, and intellectual "otherness."

2.1.1 The Genteel, Aspirational User

One vision of the library user espoused by early public library leaders was fairly optimistic: they assumed that library patrons would be well-mannered, interested principally in improving themselves, and if not already middle class, then at least aspiring to be so. To put it differently, the leadership imagined that the library-using populace would be like themselves, only less so; that they would aspire to be more like the wealthy industrialists and land barons who funded much early library development. Andrew Carnegie, for example, suggested that libraries would "stimulate the best and most aspiring poor of the community to further efforts for their own improvement" [5]. The masses would use libraries to learn, and thus mold themselves to conform with, if not the library leaders themselves, then at least the genteel middle class.

Yet, though they were imagined as *aspiring* members of the middle class, library users were expected to behave according to that class's genteel standards well before they had achieved those aspirations. This expectation, predictably, fostered alienation. As Garrison notes, by the turn of the century, laborers had the sense that, "the public library actually had been reserved, albeit 'unconsciously,' for members of the educated middle class – 'those who need it least and use it little'" [6].

2.1.2 The User as "Other"

The second early vision of the library user differs strikingly from the one above. Instead of the paternalistic optimism exhibited in the expectation of the genteel user, the vision of the user as "other" emerges from the more condescending presumption that library users would be everything elite library advocates were *not* – working-class, foreign-born, ill-educated, ill-mannered, and frankly, a little scary. This negative face of library leadership's paternalist tendencies thus cast users as uncivilized beings unable to advance themselves without the kindly assistance of their social betters; the users became not only "other," but also *lesser*.

The urge to educate, and thus to civilize, the "illiterate blacks and foreign born" was present among library leadership from the outset [2], and indeed, several historians have noted the ethnic chauvinism of various library founders. For example, Harris cites BPL Trustee George Ticknor's assertion that recent immigrants "at no time, consisted of persons who, in general, were fitted to understand our free institutions or to be intrusted with the political power given by universal suffrage" [3]. And

Garrison adds that an early president of the ALA, Charles Cutter, appeared to divide users into two types, "the fit and the unfit, the readers of The Nation and the hordes in the factories and tenements," and that he and other library leaders sought to use public libraries to preserve the socioeconomic status quo [6].

2.2 Large-Scale Digitization Initiatives

The imagined user of LSDIs remains far less clear than that of the early public library, mainly because of their newness, but also partially because of the private or semi-private initiatives' lack of transparency relative to taxpayer-supported public libraries. Still, the evidence that is available does begin to indicate a few of the imaginaries and assumptions at work in their design. To take one of the clearest examples, LSDI users, like previous digital library users, seem to have been imagined centrally as education-seekers, as opposed to entertainment- or social-interaction-seekers. In Sergey Brin's expressed desire to provide the "highest quality knowledge" [7] or Brewster Kahle's commitment to "living up to the dream of the Library of Alexandria and then taking it a step further" [8] one hears echoes of public library leaders' calls to educate and uplift the masses by providing "a better class of books than the ephemeral literature of the day" [9]. And with those echoes, one wonders whether there might also come a parallel condescension to those masses, or at least a parallel paternalism.

LSDIs also reveal their assumed user in other ways: through the languages in which the interfaces are offered, through the degree of technological expertise required to locate desired information, through the epistemological lines drawn by their classification systems, and even by the usage of the very Western library metaphor for their design. Each of these reveals a facet of the user profile envisioned by those shaping LSDI design, and each presents intriguing directions for future research.

3. IMPLICATIONS

The imagined aspirational user of the early American public library, once inscribed in the policies and architecture of the institution, recursively impacted the actual use of that institution. The imposing structures and genteel social norms of early libraries, reflective of the entrenched social hierarchies of the time, repelled the rhetorical target of the public library movement, the so-called "working man." In fact, it took several decades for the public library to divorce itself from the structural biases entrenched at the very beginning, by introducing open shelving and increased user input into collection development, as well as other more welcoming amenities.

Today's large-scale digitization initiatives may similarly be targeted at a more restricted audience than their rhetoric implies. By principally targeting an education-oriented audience, LSDIs risk blinding themselves to other valuable uses of information, such as social interaction, community building, and entertainment. Additionally, through their choices regarding language, technological accessibility, and design metaphors, LSDIs narrow the profile of their imagined user along each of those lines.

To the extent that designers of broad-scale information access initiatives – whether digital or analog – create systems with the potential to radically shift information practices worldwide, they have an obligation to consider how they might make these systems maximally inclusive of both diverse uses and diverse people. Public libraries are still not perfect in this regard, but they have made great progress – and their 150-year history has much to tell us about the possibilities and perils for newer efforts like LSDIs. This paper forms a starting point for research into these parallels and their implications.

4. REFERENCES

[1] Lee, R. 1971. The People's University—the Educational Objective of the Public Library. In Harris, M. H. Ed., Reader in American Library History. Microcard Editions, 117-124.

[2] Ditzion, S. 1947. Arsenals of a Democratic Culture. ALA.

[3] Harris, M. H. 1975. The Role of the Public Library in American Life: A Speculative Essay. University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science.

[4] Shera, J. H. 1949. Foundations of the Public Library. University of Chicago Press.

[5] Carnegie, A. 1889. The Best Fields for Philanthropy. The North American Review, 149, 397, 682-698.

[6] Garrison, D. 1979. Apostles of Culture: the Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920. Macmillan.

[7] Toobin, J. 2007. Google's Moon Shot: The Quest for the Universal Library. The New Yorker (February 5).

[8] Kahle, B. (2005). Announcing the Open Content Alliance. Yahoo! Search Blog (October 2).

[9] Wadlin, H. D. (1911). The Public Library of the City of Boston: A History. Boston: Trustees of the Public Library.